

Veranstalter: Národní muzeum Praha

Datum, Ort: 28.10.2018–30.06.2019, Prag

Národní muzeum; Slovenské národné múzeum (Hrsg.): *Česko-slovenská / Slovensko-česká výstava*. Praha 28.10.2018–30.06.2019. ISBN: 978-80-7036-567-0; 304 S.

Rezensiert von: Jakub Jareš, Bildungsabteilung, Institut für das Studium der totalitären Regime, Prag

In October 2018, after seven years of reconstruction, the most attractive parts of the historical building of the National Museum in Prague were reopened. Closing its gates for visitors in 2011, the museum had relocated all its collections into external depositories and removed all permanent exhibitions, the oldest of which was installed in the 1890s. The reconstruction is not completed yet, and new permanent exhibitions will be installed in the coming months and years.

The partial reopening took place on the occasion of two important anniversaries: Czechs and Slovaks celebrated the foundation of their common republic 100 years ago, and the museum commemorated 200 years of its existence. The reopening was staged as a genuine Czecho-Slovak event and attracted unprecedented public attention. In the first three months, over 350,000 visitors came to see the interior and both exhibitions, with some of them queuing for hours. This interest cannot be explained by free admission only (until December 31). It also indicates the extraordinary position of the museum in Czech society. The neorenaissance building at the top of Wenceslas Square is one of the most significant places of Czech memory.

The museum was founded in 1818 by a group of patriotic aristocrats who wanted to contribute to the development of science and collections in Bohemia. A decade later, the historian František Palacký launched the first museum scientific journal and reshaped the role of the museum. It became the very centre of Czech-speaking science. Its status was manifested by the opening of a new representative and highly symbolical building in 1891. The winning architect Josef Schulz had persuaded the jury especially by his proposal

of a pantheon—a festive hall celebrating the most prominent representatives of Czech science and culture. The exterior and interior decorations, the statues, and busts reflected the rising Czech nationalism and historicism of that time.

Fig. 1: National Museum in Prague, a few days after the reopening in October 2018

Photo: Derbrauni [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:National_Museum_in_Prague_\(main_building\)_%283%29.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:National_Museum_in_Prague_%28main_building%29_%283%29.jpg), „National Museum in Prague (main building) (3)“, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>

During the 20th century, new layers of memory were added. In August 1968, Soviet soldiers shot at the house. The bullet holes on the façade became a symbol of the occupation. During the present reconstruction, they provoked a passionate debate in mass media. Finally, most of the holes were filled, and visible traces were left only on two pillars, which raised wide criticism. Paradoxically, this story resonated in public much more than the rarely discussed absence of any architectural competition for a modernization of the museum and the very conservative approach to reconstruction.

The preparation of the new permanent exhibition raised no public interest. The attention of journalists, politicians, and public was—and still is—focused almost exclusively on the building. However, a museum as an institution cannot be evaluated by the work of conservationists. Therefore, this review concentrates on the first two temporary exhibitions presented in the reopened venue.

The „Czech-Slovak/Slovak-Czech exhibition“ was co-organized with the Slovak National Museum and was shown first in Bratislava in April 2018. Because of its larger exhibition space, the Prague version is slightly modified and broadened, but the core of the exhibition is identical. The exhibition can be seen, therefore, as an example of continuous cooperation between the two nations. But at the same time, it is also an example of independent narratives and memories. The exhibition puts Czech and Slovak perspectives next to each other rather than elaborating a common story. For example, the cat-

atalogue always gives both points of view. It opens with two editorials (by the Czech and Slovak National Museum directors) and two historiographical studies (by a Czech and a Slovak historian). There is no common text in the catalogue.

The aim of the joint undertaking as formulated by these authors was to tell the story of Czechs and Slovaks in their common state from 1918 to 1992. In the words of Michal Lukeš, director of the Czech National Museum, the exhibition should „show some ups and downs of the combined state and, in particular, how Czechs and Slovaks went through in 1918–1992 and what influenced them in this period“ (p. 15). Nostalgia for the lost joint state is also identified as one of the topics of the exhibition.

The very beginning of the Czech-Slovak exhibition is dedicated to state-building and literally made from bronze and marble. Visitors are „welcomed“ by busts of the Czechoslovakia’s founding fathers, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, Edvard Beneš, and Milan Rastislav Štefánik. In the first room, the most important legal acts and political documents are displayed—papers from the rise or fall of the state. Among others, there are originals of the Pittsburgh Agreement, the Washington Declaration (both 1918), and the Munich Agreement (1938), as well as minutes from the meeting of Emil Hácha with Adolf Hitler in Berlin in March 1939. This section is followed by a short overview of the political development of Czechoslovakia until 1992. But here the political perspective comes to an end. From this point onwards, the exhibition concentrates on society, architecture, and everyday life in Czechoslovakia from 1918 to 1992. Among the topics presented are education, sport, and leisure time, design, industry, transportation and communication, development of urban and rural areas, arts, and pop culture.

Fig. 2: Part of the exhibition representing daily life objects of politicians and public figures

Photo: Jakub Jareš

The respective selection of exhibits is explained by textual introductions—a traditional exhibition scenario. However, these texts are mere pendants to the objects, and missing them makes no difference. The ex-

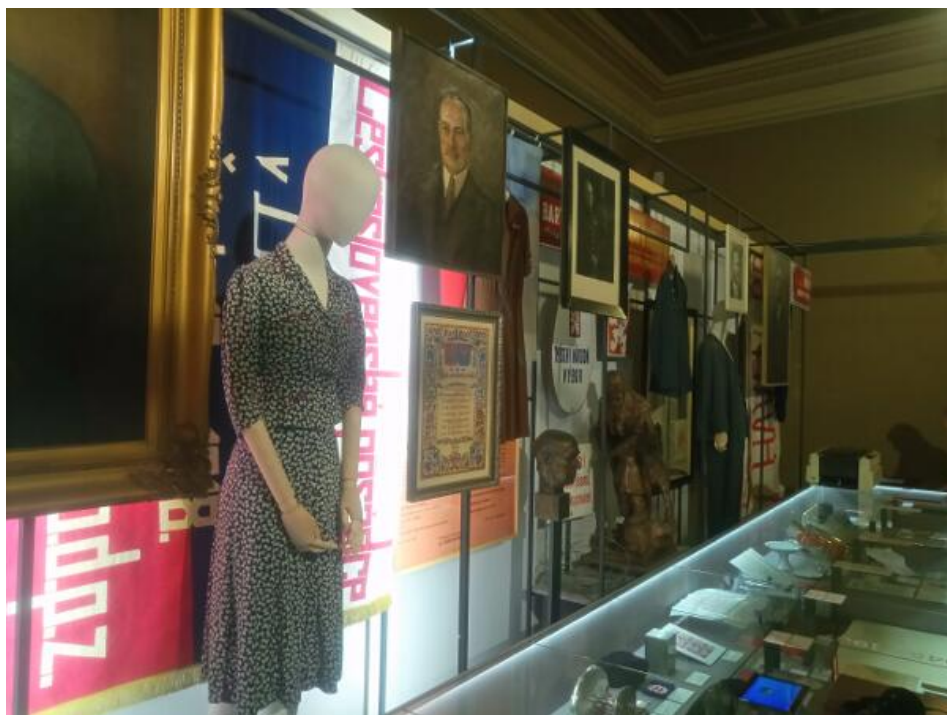
hibits are the only language of the exhibition. For example, in one showcase, visitors can see the burned pilot jacket of Slovak politician Štefánik (who died in an accident in 1919), glasses of Alexander Dubček, the death mask of student Jan Palach, and a commemorative bowl of the 17th Congress of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. Another section, „Made in Czechoslovakia“, shows objects most visitors had (or still have) at home: radios, table lamps, design cutlery, thermos, and plastic toys.

In total, there are hundreds or even thousands of objects in the exhibition. Many of them represent daily life in socialism, which is why the exhibition evokes strong nostalgia among Czech or Slovak visitors. Statements like, „Look, we still have this in the garage,“ or „Mama, you used to play with this?“ are frequent visitors’ reactions. Before the jubilee, the museum had announced a public collection, and people had donated objects related to Czechoslovak history. Unsurprisingly, they can see them now in the showcases. The positive thing is that the array of objects is really rich and wide. The exhibition focuses on important figures and affairs of the state’s history and equally on everyday and average matters. Therefore, visitors can admire a model of the iconic villa Tugendhat from Brno by Mies van der Rohe, while at the same time seeing a model of a socialist grocery from Sulovice—an ordinary building from an ordinary village. This crossing of borders between top and average performances, between canon and pop culture, can be found in almost all parts of the exhibition.

Fig. 3: Communication and transportation section: signs of the Postal Office, Czechoslovak Bus and Railroad Services and the companies Jawa and Tatra

Photo: Jakub Jareš

Unlike the richness and diversity of items, the conceptual coherence of the exhibition is disputable. A critical and reflexive approach to history is rather lacking. For example, the exhibition does not pay any attention to the Czechoslovak minorities—Germans, Jews, Roma, Magyars, or Carpathian Ruthenians—even though their footprints in Czech and Slovak history are essential. An exhibition focused solely on the Czech-Slovak



relationship could justify this reduction, but this is not the case—the exhibition is about Czechoslovak history as such and therefore somehow incomplete. This is not the first time a museum has omitted minorities. In the permanent exposition „Crossroads of Czech and Czechoslovak Statehood“ in the Vítkov Monument in Prague (opened in 2009), the same Czech-Slovak bilateral escape from multilateral Czechoslovak-German-Jewish-Magyar-Roma-Ruthenian history can be observed. But to avoid being overcritical, we should highlight and praise the extraordinary presence of Slovaks and Slovak topics in the exhibition, which is quite unusual both in Czech museums and in Czech historiography.

Fig. 4: Strange proximities: the gypsum cast of the leg of Evžen Rošický, an athlete executed by the Nazis, only a few centimetres from a CD of songs by Karel Gott

Photo: Jakub Jareš

The second exhibition commemorates the 200th anniversary of the museum. It is called plainly „2 x 100,“ and its principle is simple: it presents 200 items demonstrating the richness, variety, and representativeness of the museum’s collections (over 20 million objects). The curators structured the exhibition within several categories, of which some are very concrete (National Museum, Middle Ages and Romanticism, Notes and Melodies, Stone and Paper, War and Peace, Fauna and Flora), and some are very abstract (Fragile and Eternal, Gold and Gilt, Divine and Devilish, Progress and Extinction). The exhibits vary greatly: precious and bizarre, huge and tiny, ancient and modern. Visitors can see a prehistoric bone of *Burianosaurus augustai*, the wedding dress of Napoleon’s wife, the violin of Antonio Stradivari, a glass model of an octopus, a monkey fur coat of the president’s wife Hana Benešová or a portrait of Palacký.

Most of the objects are presented in massive iron cages, similar to cages in zoos, that cover almost the whole space of three exhibition rooms. This construction increases the distance of viewers from the objects, as if the authors wanted to underscore their preciousness. Although this interaction might be a good idea, the outcome is questionable: the barrier makes the objects hardly visible.

Similar to Czech-Slovak exhibition, the au-

thors decided not to hierarchize the objects. Instead, they are put simply side by side in both exhibitions. Obviously, the authors wanted the visitors to decide for themselves what to pick from the offering. Therefore, both exhibitions remind one of a supermarket filled with historical objects, where everyone is welcome to „buy“ what he or she likes. On the one hand, this is a very democratic approach that opens free space for the public to enjoy the exhibitions in their own way. On the other hand, it remains an open question whether this is motivated by a conceptual decision or rather is the result of an uncertainty about what to explain to the audience.

This ambiguity is especially obvious in the 2 x 100 exhibition, in which many objects without any intrinsic connection are placed next to each other. In the category „Progress and Extinction“, one can see the death mask of the 19th-century politician František Ladislav Rieger, the painting „Common Way to Cosmos“ commemorating the joint Soviet-Czechoslovak space mission in 1978, or a drawing of *Amanita muscaria* (fly agaric). Their interconnection is not explained and only barely exists. This random selection of objects is underscored by somehow unrelated texts. To mention just one eloquent example, in the category „Divine and Devilish“, a printed Melantrich Bible is exhibited next to a skeleton of a Tasmanian devil. The first is described solely from a perspective of the history of printing, the latter from a zoological point of view. Their neighbourhood in the „theological“ category remains incomprehensible.

Fig. 5: Penguins, death mask and the painting Common Way to Cosmos in the 2 x 100 exhibition

Photo: Jakub Jareš

The category called „National Museum“ deserves special attention. The exhibited objects commemorate mainly the first century of the museum’s history. The first rubber stamp from 1818, a painting of the building, and portraits of the founding aristocrats are displayed here, as are enigmatic wooden boxes donated to the museum by Bohuslav Jiruš. According to the scientist’s legacy (he died in 1901), the boxes will not be opened before 2101. All of these are undoubtedly interesting items.



Yet, it is still a slight taste from the long and complicated history, and it leaves almost the whole 20th century unexamined. No object is related to post-war history, to say nothing about contemporary developments after 1989. Unfortunately, there is no comprehensive text offering any interpretation of two hundred years of the museum's history or its special position in Czech society.

It is probably exactly the National Museum's prominence that is the reason for the rather questionable outputs of the anniversary. Public attention is concentrated almost exclusively on the renovated building, which attracts an unprecedented number of visitors. Examining their feelings about the visit is not the goal of this review. In any case, a short look at the visitors' book gives some hints. Some complain that they expected a permanent exhibition and found only two temporary presentations. Others criticize the services of an only partly opened building (of which the major part is still under construction). Some complain about the high entrance prices. But most of them are glad they could visit the famous building and show it to their children, some of whom were not yet born when the museum closed. From this point of view, the exhibition—temporary or permanent—is only an additional value.

Therefore, thinking about the future permanent exhibitions could start from the question of how to deal with such a significant building full of meanings, historical layers, and public expectations and how to successfully communicate its neorenaissance historicism heritage in a modern exhibition language. The story of the reopening of the National Museum in Prague is therefore unfinished. It should be evaluated finally after the opening of its permanent exhibitions.

Jakub Jareš über Národní muzeum; Slovenské národné múzeum (Hrsg.): *Česko-slovenská / Slovensko-česká výstava*. Praha 28.10.2018–30.06.2019, in: H-Soz-Kult 27.04.2019.

